

















# MAIL SUPPLEMENT TO THE HONGKONG FREE PRESS.

HONGKONG, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 23RD, 1887.

## THE HONGKONG PUBLIC HEALTH BILL.

The Legislative Council on Monday was occupied in discussing the minimum amount of space that should be allowed for every adult Chinaman. 240 cubic feet is considered sufficient for a European, but the Government is of opinion that nothing less than 300 feet would do for Hongkong. The Hon. A. P. MacEwen proposed that the space should be fixed at 200 feet, and when it was seen that there was no chance of securing this, the Hon. J. B. MacEwen proposed as a compromise 250 feet, which would have been still in advance of London. But no; the Government rejected any compromise; it had said 300 feet and was determined to stick to it. The Acting Attorney-General, who seems to have no ideas of his own on the subject, read page after page of extracts from various scientific authors as to the amount of space required by human beings, but the fact remains that people do live and thrive in spaces very much smaller than scientists may consider theoretically desirable, and if 240 feet are considered practically sufficient in London 250 might reasonably have been taken as sufficient in Hongkong. The Surveyor-General admits that 300 feet would not be necessary. Well, for the greater portion of the year we have a climate like that of Singapore in so far as it induces people to keep their windows open or to sleep out of doors, and it is only during a very brief period that the cold is sufficient to make the Chinaman careful about keeping draughts out of his room. For the whole of the year it is necessary or desirable to enforce stringent regulations as to overcrowding—regulations which, if enforced, will necessarily have the effect of making the labouring man pay an increase on his already burdensome rent in order to secure the accommodation he does not want but must have. If any of our readers have any doubts as to whether 300 cubic feet is more than enough let them measure one of their own rooms and divide the cubic contents by three hundred. This will give the number of persons that might sleep in the room according to the idea of the Government. Much that every one will agree that much more than 300 cubic feet is necessary for a comfortable and healthy room. We believe that if the Cubic of many steamers were measured it would be found that the air space allowed for the passengers is much less than 300 feet. Of course, as Mr. MacEwen says, we should be glad to have every person in the colony could have as large a space as the Government desires. But that is not the question. The great bulk of the population have to live on wages of 8 and 9 a month, and perhaps out of this amount have to support a family. Space is very valuable in Hongkong, and the chief item of expenditure with most persons is the rent. Bait in Hongkong, we believe, is higher than in any other place. To adapt a policy which will have the effect of further raising the rents of the working classes strikes us as cruel and heartless. Ample breathing space during sleep, of course, desirable, but the Government has no right to insist that a man shall pay for more than is absolutely necessary. 300 feet, we maintain, is more than necessary. A room containing 2,000 cubic feet, fitted up with bunks, could accommodate ten men comfortably. General CAMERON refers to the troops with their 1,000 cubic feet of air space per man, and the excellent health they enjoy. But is it due to air space? Is nothing to be set down to the blankets and puttees which they sleep in? Are they compelled to wear, to the regulations which prevent their exposing themselves to the sun, or to the constant medical inspection? If we follow the argument out, to its logical conclusion where will it land us? A soldier is given so many cubic feet of space, therefore a coolie must have so many feet; a head of the day, therefore a coolie must not be allowed to work in the sun. There can be no doubt that working in the sun is very injurious indeed, to the Chinaman as well as the European. Are we to expect that the Government will bring in a Bill dealing with this source of injury to health? We are more practical. Government, not far-fetched theories and fads. The Government was quite willing to laugh to scorn the opinion of the medical members of the Sanitary Board on one point, but on other points, where medical opinion fits in with the sense of common decency, it is quoted by the page and the public is apparently expected to pay as much reverence to it as to holy writ.

The division taken on the question was of the usual description—the official members on one side, the unofficial members on the other, the amendment being lost by a majority of 10. But it was not, strictly speaking, a Government measure. General CAMERON, being asked for a statement on this point, was magnanimous, and said he would not make a Government question, that every one would vote as he liked. But the officials acted as good men and true, and did not desert their chief, even although they might consider themselves as volunteers and not under compulsion. Soldiers in their training have to go through the same step, viz. it is not the official members who are to be blamed, but the officials have to go through a sort of amputation training in the exercise of following my leader, and are taught to recognise the distinction between the two great divisions of the human race, the official and the unofficial. So when they are made Legislative Councilors their votes may generally be expected to be given on the side of the Government, even although they are told they may vote as they choose. It is not that they are servile in their voting, or that they are incapable of forming an opinion of their own if they care to take the trouble to do so, but they naturally proceed on the assumption that the Government must be held to be right, and the official members wrong until the contrary is shown. If, therefore, the officials are a little short in argumentative power, or if the argument pro and con are about equally balanced, an official will vote to the Government. Such weakly behaviour something like the foreman of a jury who professes to be independent of opinion, but who does so venture to vote there is no man in the colony to whose opinion the public would have attached greater weight. But what Mr. Russell said in effect was that he had listened to the arguments of the official and unofficial members, and he gave his judgment on the case as presented to him, that judgment being that the representatives of the ratepayers had not made out a case against the Government. If his

Honour will adopt our recommendation of measuring a room in his own house and forming an opinion for himself as to the number of men who might without danger be accommodated in bunks ranged round the walls he will naturally come to the conclusion that the case was not fairly presented to him. He evidently attached some importance to the fact that the London minimum is 240 feet only, because he put a question to the Acting Attorney-General as to whether the space required for metropolitan common lodging houses had been overridden by the model by-laws of the Board of Health to which Mr. Cameron had referred. Mr. Cameron was unable to answer the question. We will do it for him. The metropolitan by-laws have not been overridden by the model by-laws. They are, as Mr. Cameron says, "model" by-laws. Mr. Cameron seems entirely ignorant of the machinery of sanitary administration in England. Every town of any size secures from Parliament authority to make its own sanitary regulations, and in two towns only they are found to be so good that they are adopted as the model for other towns. In every case the modifications or amplifications consequent on local customs and the current of public opinion. In the country districts and small towns where special Acts have not been obtained the sanitary authority is vested in the Board of Guardians, Improvement Commissioners, Local Boards, and similar authorities. These authorities are at liberty to make their own by-laws, subject to the approval of the Local Government Board, and the "model by-laws" are presented to them as a pattern. So much for the model by-laws. It is idle to introduce the Imperial Act into the discussion in Hongkong. The Imperial Act is largely permissive in its nature, and its application according to the wants of the local authority through which it is administered. If the Government here wanted a model it should have taken the regulations of some particular town in England, and for this purpose no better model could have been taken than London. In London the minimum amount of space to be provided in common lodging houses is fixed at 240 feet, and the same measurement might very reasonably be adopted here, especially as the regulations to be applied to private houses as well as lodging houses—and the views of the population here as to the amount of space they require, speaking generally, are more moderate than those of the average Londoner. In Manchester, it is true, it is much larger, but it is fixed upon the minimum, which may be used as an argument in support of the Government view. But the fact shows, also, how far local opinion differs in England. One town says it will have three hundred feet, another town says it will have more, and each has its own way. But the Hongkong Government refuses to take local opinion into account. It says it will "enforce" what it thinks proper, and if the ratepayers' representatives do succeed in convincing it on a point here and there that it is going too far, and a modification is made, the modification is spoken of as a "concession," as something conceded as a favour. General CAMERON, in his speech, said that if the Government were to take local opinion into account, it would be a concession, but while this is the spirit animating the officials the division is inevitable. The division does not imply hostility, but it is the business of the official members to keep a close watch on the Government to see that it does not impose on the community any legislation the community does not want, and they must therefore always be looked upon as serving the very useful purpose of an opposition, using the word in its strictest parliamentary sense. But the opposition votes with the Government when it can; and in this respect General CAMERON did the unofficial members but scant justice on Monday. His Excellency said, "If we vote always, and the Government always, the members vote just as they vote as the members of the Government do, why, it makes it very necessary that there should be unanimity amongst the Government." But the Council does not always vote in two parties. There are comparatively few Government measures that the unofficial members think necessary to vote against. Nor do the officials vote to support. Each member preserves his own independence, and even in the divisions which have taken place in Committees on the Public Health Bill the unofficial votes have been more than once divided, a portion of it going over to the Government. When, therefore, the unofficial members unite as one man in giving great deference to the views of the official members, being that of five representative men each exercising an independent judgment, whereas the officials work as a body and do not exercise an independent judgment. There are one or two historical cases where an official has ventured to do so; the consequences have not been such as to encourage others to follow the example.

## THE MEMBER FOR THE CHAMBER.

Mr. A. P. MacEwen was, as was anticipated, on Saturday unanimously elected as representative of the Chamber of Commerce in the Legislative Council. The choice of the Chamber will be endorsed by the community generally. Mr. MacEwen being universally recognised to use the homely phrase employed by the speakers on Saturday, as the right man in the right place. The value of his services in connection with the sanitary legislation now before the Council are too well known to call for special reference. Although in various matters of detail in connection with this subject his views may have been out of accord with those of property owners, he has shown a willingness at all times to look at both sides of a question and to accept modifications where good reason could be shown. But the most important feature in Mr. MacEwen's policy is his advocacy of democracy, as opposed to autocratic government. His sympathies are with the community rather than with the officials, and he has consistently advocated the grant to the ratepayers of a share in the control of their own affairs. Mr. MacEwen also possesses the merit of activity and energy, and never finds it too much trouble to take up a question that he thinks may be usefully ventilated. The necessity of a light touch in the Council is the Court, the magnanimity on Stonecutters' Island, the defence of the water supply, and the condition of our markets, are all matters on which Mr. MacEwen has made himself heard. Sometimes perhaps he may stir up a hornet's nest, as in the case of the Convention, but little matters of that kind may be dismissed with a smile. The important point is this, that while Mr. MacEwen remains in the Council there will not be that absence of healthy discussion of public questions which he justly complains had prevailed in the past.

## CHINA AND HER TRIBUTARIES.

The relations subsisting between the Central Kingdom and her tributaries constitute a veritable Chinese puzzle. The French solved it in Tonquin in a very rough and ready fashion by breaking it to pieces. The British in Burma proceeded in a quieter way, and China in the end confessed herself satisfied with the result. The French mission from Moukley to Peking, conducted by the head of the Burmese hierarchy, in Korea again the question of suzerainty is becoming a burning one. China has claimed a more than nominal suzerainty over that state, but has nevertheless stood by and seen her so-called tributary maintain a dependent, trading, with foreign powers. Korea has recently expressed her intention of sending missions to the countries with which she has entered into treaty relations, and at this point China seems disposed to stop in and exercise a power of veto. Whether she will actually do so or not remains to be seen, but as our Tibetan correspondent remarks, she has just declared her intention to go against her, and she will sooner or later have to pay the penalty of her ambiguity—that irremediable blot on all her statesmanship. In the days when China was a powerful country surrounded by weak states, an ambiguous policy was convenient and not dangerous, as the strong could always turn the weak to her own advantage. But in dealing with nations stronger than herself ambiguities are but the snares which she lays for her own feet. The truth of these remarks was strikingly illustrated in Tonquin. When it came to a direct issue China showed by the sacrifices she was willing to make how much value she set at least to the suzerainty which she had allowed to dwindle to an empty form. The geographical position of Korea makes the status of that country of importance not only to China but to other countries, notably Russia, Great Britain, and Japan. Russia would like to have the country for herself, and if left with the suzerainty of the King to accept a protectorate. But this would be distasteful, not only to Great Britain, who would naturally prefer to see the small and feeble state recognised as an integral portion of the Chinese Empire. But if China were to assume entire control of the government, Japan, who claims equal rights in Korea, would make the matter a matter of dispute. Such is the complicated state of affairs which the ambiguity of China has brought about in the Far Eastern Kingdom.

Of all the tributary states of China that of Tibet is most completely under the direct control of the Government of Peking. Yet even here the same ambiguity of policy is seen. In a recent case the number of Chinese documents required for Tibet which show close relations really are. The documents are amusing too, recording how a certain lama was stripped of his rank and "forbidden to appear again in the flesh," how after his death it was "permitted that his re-embodiment should take place," and how the soul of the deceased lama's soul was transmitted by discovered by drawing lots. The Government of Tibet is a religious government, and yet so great is the reverence paid to the Emperor of China that he is recognised as having power not only to make or annul appointments in the hierarchy but even to control the transmigration of souls. There are, moreover, Imperial Residents stationed in Tibet, who exercise a very real control in the country, and particularly with reference to the foreign relations of the Government. Those who have read Hux's travels will remember that it was the Chinese Resident who ordered the departure of that traveller from Lhasa, where, where he might probably have remained in peace as long as he chose. But in the recent case of the expedition organised by Mr. COLMAN MACALISTAIR, it was the Tibetans themselves who were represented as vetoing the advance of the party, although there can be no doubt the real opposition was at Peking. It is a pity that English papers are so small indeed. If a change of circumstances should arise which rendered it desirable in the eyes of the Peking statesmen, the authority of China over Tibet would be represented as absolute. An Indian contemporary remarks that "The very vagueness of his claims is turned to advantage by our friends in China." The latter is full of truth, and it is likely to be less so in the future than in the past. As the states on the borders of China are brought more directly into relations with other powers China will find it necessary to formulate her claims over them with precision. It is not wise to see those claims ignored altogether, as in London claims are made that Nepal, "The Times of India" says, "We cannot read without giving the story of the recent tribute mission from Nepal to Peking. To many it will have come as a revelation that the Emperor of China still claims to be the protector of this Himalayan hill State. Our readers of the Himalayas will be glad to give us a second thought." But with our recent experience in Upper Burma, the bare fact of its being put forward at all should afford matter for reflection. The fact stated may very properly afford matter for reflection, but hardly for surprise. 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